

Catholic Urban Legends Come to Pittsburgh

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MY PRESENTATION will connect three historical personages. The first is Joe Barker, an anti-Catholic polemicist from 1845 to 1862 who managed to get elected Pittsburgh's mayor, ordered the arrest of the first Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh, and possibly arranged to have the first Saint Paul Cathedral set on fire. The second is Michael O'Connor, the first bishop of Pittsburgh, who served in that role from 1843 to 1860. The third is "Mikey" from the old Life breakfast cereal commercials. "Let Mikey try it. He'll eat anything!"

In the 1960s and 1970s, Pop Rocks were pretty popular. Kids would bite on one and a small amount of carbonization would be released, giving kids a tingling sensation in the mouth. Pop Rocks became famous as the source of a classic urban legend. It quickly traveled from playground to playground throughout the country that if you swallowed a bunch of Pop Rocks whole, then drank soda real fast, your stomach would explode. It was said that the child actor who starred as Mikey in that old Life breakfast cereal commercial died in just such a fashion after gorging on Pop Rocks and downing a six-pack of cola. Pop Rocks were allegedly pulled from the market after Mikey's untimely demise.

As widespread as the stories of killer Pop Rocks were back in the 1970s and early 1980s, the candy never exploded when ingested. They are still around under a different name, and so is the actor who played Mikey. But the Pop Rocks story remains a classic

urban legend and there are grown-ups today who will cite chapter and verse as God's own truth of the killer candy.

Like fairy tales, urban legends are cautionary stories. But unlike fairy tales, they are always told as fact. E-mails buzz every day with a thousand urban legends and the Internet serves as both incubator and distributor of a hundred thousand more.

Just as ubiquitous as stories about Pop Rocks are what I call Catholic Urban Legends.

Here's an example: Brave Galileo has been forced by the Inquisition to recant his teaching that the Earth in fact orbits the Sun. But as he exits the star chamber of the inquisitor judges, he exclaims bravely, sotto voce: *Eppur si muove!*—"And yet it moves!"

Kids are taught that in schools, columnists will cite it, game show hosts will have it as a question and answer. But it never happened. There is no contemporary record of any such quote and Galileo certainly never acknowledged or claimed to have said it, and he would live for nearly 10 more years. In fact, a French anti-clerical propagandist wrote the first discernible public claim to any such quote attributed to Galileo nearly 125 years after his death. It was an invention, a bit of propaganda devised in the 18th Century battle between the so-called French Enlightenment and the Church.

Catholic urban legends abound in our world. Fabrications of history cited as universal truths, they are usually believed by the

enlightened and the educated, becoming part of our cultural DNA in America, passed on from generation to generation, textbook to textbook, and viewed not as the product of bigotry, but as normative thinking. They have been repeated so often for so many years that they are accepted as basic truths.

The list of Catholic urban legends covers everything from the Inquisition, the Crusades, slavery, the papacy in general and Pius XII in particular. The Spanish Inquisition is said to have slaughtered and tortured hundreds of thousands of Protestant souls. However, in truth there were few if any Protestants at any time in Spain, let alone during the Inquisition period. The Crusades are presented as a vicious unprovoked offensive launched by the Church on innocent middle-eastern Islam. Wrong. They began as an attempt to come to the aid of Constantinople that was under attack by aggressive Islamic armies.

Slavery? Slavery in the West was instituted and blessed by the papacy. Patently false, but patently believed.

The Papacy? A million legends of uniform corruption from the sixth century on leading up to Pius XII, the crypto-Nazi who turned a blind eye to the Holocaust. No serious historian would now consider either charge worth noting, but most people accept them as common, unquestioned fact.

This is not to say that the lessons of history or the interpretation of historical events are not open to debate and contrary opin-

ions. The Crusades and the events surrounding them are complicated and open to different interpretations. But Catholic urban legends are not varying interpretations of history. They are falsifications of history. They are mistakes in fact, or more likely a converting of legend and propaganda to fact, until the truths of the actual events are forgotten in the culture and the public mind.

Catholic urban legends share all the essential characteristics of all urban legends:

They are ubiquitous.

One of the difficulties in refuting them is that almost everyone believes them. Catholic urban legends are not the strange beliefs of one particular fundamentalist sect. They are part of the Western cultural inheritance shared by everyone, Catholics included. They are believed because everyone believes them.

They are presented as fact.

In the 1970s, you didn't have to "prove" that Mikey died from exploding Pop Rocks. He just did – everybody knew that. The same is true of the Catholic urban legends surrounding Galileo, for example. People are not required to prove such assertions. They are simply accepted as actual fact.

They are based on real events.

Pop Rocks existed and "fizzed" when you bit into them. That didn't mean they would explode in your stomach, but it did mean that you were talking about something real, not fantasy or fairy tales. Similarly, the trial of Galileo took place. There were Crusades and Inquisitions. Pius XII was pope during World War II. Catholic urban legends are usually rooted in real historical events.

They are populist cautionary tales.

The urban legend of Pop Rocks was meant to warn kids that unfeeling corporations would kill for profits unless somebody reins them in. Catholic urban legends, invented as part of post-Reformation theological propaganda, were utilized to create the impression of a corrupt, power-hungry church that was the enemy of freedom and the true meaning of the Scriptures. They are utilized today to dismiss Church positions out-of-hand. The Church is anti-science, as proven in the Galileo urban legend, and therefore its position on embryonic stem cell research can be readily dismissed without arguing the merits of that position.

So where did these Catholic urban legends come from and how did they get to Pittsburgh to become cannon fodder for Joe Barker?

Though open to varying historical interpretations itself, there is little doubt that the explosion in the printed word following Gutenberg's invention of moveable type and the printing press in 1440 had much to do with the character of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century. The Reformation became a war of polemicists, with dueling pamphlets and books appealing for the hearts and minds of the growing business class that was often more literate than their high-born rulers. These city burgers, in Germany, Switzerland and England, would become the heart of the Reformation.

Luther and the other reformers knew that flowery theological debate would not move the masses. The rhetoric had to be steamy and immediate. It also needed a history. The vacuum in



the Protestant position was history. Where was Christ for 1,500 years if he did not exist in the Church? Very early, an understanding of Church history grew out of the Reformation. It was simple: the Church existed in a pure form in the days of the Apostles and immediately thereafter. However, nearly from that inception, the pure Church was corrupted by Rome. It was this false pagan entity that corrupted early, pure Christianity and created the Catholic Church and the papacy. That pure Christianity was only rediscovered in the age of the Reformers.

One of the earliest histories that developed this theme was the *Centuries of Magdeburg* (1559). It was a pivotal historical work that established the essential Protestant historical canon: the corruption of the Church began after the death of the last Apostle. This corrupt Church emerged victorious under Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. That Church was, in effect, the pagan Roman Empire – the anti-Christ as described in Revelations – disguised in this hybrid, corrupt Christianity of Roman Catholicism. It would be the *Centuries of Magdeburg* – written by a team of scholars over the remaining decades of the century –

that created an understanding of Church history that would become common Protestant understanding, common English understanding, common American understanding, and the source for many of our Catholic urban legends.

The *Centuries* had good history within it. It was serious scholarship, but it was steeped in theological propaganda. It repeated tales of corruption as descriptive of the whole, creating the idea of the "Dark Ages" as a harrowing time in history when ignorance and superstition reigned in a Catholic Church-imposed theocracy.

Of course, the *Centuries* was not alone. Except for the Bible, it is hard to argue that any one book can create a culture. A wealth of material was produced during the Reformation years and those following. Much of it created a propaganda that would write the history of the period and create an image of the Catholic Church that would come to dominate Western thought, particularly in England. And, through England, America.

History, it is said, is written by the winners and in England the Reformation won. It is that understanding of Catholicism, built on Reformation polemics, which would create a thousand Catholic urban legends, and an understanding of Catholicism that would become culturally normative among what Winston Churchill called the English-speaking peoples.

Another important work was *The Apologie of William of Orange* (1581), written by the French Huguenot Pierre Loyseleur de Villiers. This became hugely popular in England and helped to define the public image of the Inquisition. Meant as a propaganda tool in the Dutch Revolt against Spanish rule, the tract was less a

defense of revolt than a Calvinist apologia. It was through works like the *Apologie* that the Inquisition became, in the popular culture, the brutal machinery that slaughtered millions of Protestants. This image of the Inquisition is perhaps the most persistent image of Catholicism, found in such later editions as Fox's *Book of Martyrs*, Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

The critical point for our story is the use of this anti-Catholic propaganda and its becoming a central part of English thinking in the sixteenth century, the eve of the colonization of America. The concept of a corrupt and scandal-ridden, oppressive Catholic Church at war with the natural rights of Englishmen in the centuries prior to the Reformation became part of common English understanding of their history and heritage. It has only been literally in our own day that the history of the Church in England has been recaptured from this Reformation propaganda. (The case has been made that this correction of historical understanding was only possible once England no longer cared.)

Under Queen Elizabeth I, the real fear of a Spanish invasion to overthrow her led to a government-sponsored propaganda campaign painting the Catholic Church as the violent, deceitful enemy of England, English liberty and the true faith. Anti-Catholic tracts and anti-Catholicism became primary religious, catechetical and historical reading in the second half of the 16th Century in England.

And then came the Gunpowder Plot to solidify this anti-Catholic understanding and turn it

into the cultural DNA that would be inherited in America.

On November 5, 1605, a small group of fanatic Catholics planned to blow up the House of Parliament in London, killing the assembled leadership and assassinating King James I. Suffering under anti-Catholic persecution, English Catholics had hoped for relief from the new Stuart king and his allegedly Catholic wife. When it became clear that a wider toleration was not to be, what would be known to history as the "Gunpowder Plot" was hatched among a few desperate men.

The conspirators hoped that the ensuing destruction would lead to a Catholic uprising in England and an invasion from Europe. Instead, the conspiracy was discovered, the conspirators captured and later executed. The anti-Catholic laws in place prior to the Gunpowder Plot were cruel, but aimed and enforced primarily at priests, who were tortured and killed if found in England. The laity who remained quietly faithful to Rome were generally left in peace and the restrictions placed upon them lackadaisically enforced. But in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot, Antonia Fraser wrote in *Faith and Treason*:

"Catholics could no longer practice law, nor serve in the Army or Navy as officers. They could act as neither executor of a will, guardian to a minor, nor even possess a weapon except in cases of self-defense. Catholics could not receive a university degree, could not vote in local elections or in parliamentary elections. All this on top of the spiritual penalties by which Catholics were ordered to marry in the Anglican church, take their children there for baptism, and finally rest in its burial

grounds...(A) profound prejudice against Papists...remained lurking in the popular conscience after 1605, ready to emerge from its depths at any hint of leniency towards them. For many Protestants, a declaration of February 1606 on the subject of the Plot by Sir Thomas Smith summed the matter up: 'this bloody stain and mark will never be washed out of Popish religion.' It was a stain that would be passed on to unborn generations. It was the alleged 'foreign' nature of Catholicism – ruled by an alien Pope based in Rome – which made it perennially vulnerable to attack.... In 1651 Milton called Catholicism not so much a religion as 'a (foreign) priestly despotism under the cloak of religion arrayed in the spoils of temporal power.'"

(Faith and Treason, The Story of the Gunpowder Plot, Antonia Fraser, Doubleday, 1996).

It was only 15 years after the unmasking of the Gunpowder Plot that the Puritans came to America to establish Plymouth Colony in 1620. They brought with them a hatred of Catholicism that was elementary to their very theology, and strongly inflamed by the populist anti-Catholicism engendered in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot. If Anglicans and Puritans could agree on nothing else, they could agree that "popery" was the one great intolerable evil. This anti-Catholicism, at the very birth of the nation, would become an integral part of American culture and thought, long after it had dissipated on the European continent and even in England itself.

Virtually every colony had some form of Catholic disabilities in their fundamental charters, denying them the right to hold office

or to practice their faith. The Puritan model in New England was the most severe, but the Virginia model founded on the Established Church also tolerated no dissenters, such as the Pilgrims, but was equally forbidding of Catholics. Anti-Catholic disabilities were found in the legislation of every colony, including Rhode Island, which is generally seen as the "cradle of religious liberty." A 1664 law in Rhode Island specifically excepted Catholics from the right to public office. Maryland, a safe haven for Catholics when established in 1634, by 1694 had forbidden public mass and established the general Catholic disabilities common under English law. William Penn attempted to begin his colony of Pennsylvania as a haven for freedom of religion, but within a short time laws were passed in the colony that forbade public mass and denied public office to Catholics.

As the divisions between England and the colonies grew more severe in the 18th century, anti-Catholicism grew even more intense in the colonies. The Quebec Act of 1774 roused anti-Catholic fever as it appeared to legalize a Catholic presence west of the Alleghenies. We have a "popish French government in our rears set up for the express purpose of destroying our liberties," a popular pamphlet proclaimed. Or another: "We may live to see our churches converted to mass houses and our lands plundered for tythes for the support of a Popish clergy. The Inquisition may erect her standard in Pennsylvania, and the city of Philadelphia may yet experience the carnage of St. Bartholomew's Day." Or this popular couplet: "If Gallic papists have a right, To worship their own way, Then farewell to the liber-

ties, Of Poor America."

During the Revolution itself, the new American government downplayed anti-Catholicism as it sought alliance and aid from England's traditional Catholic enemies, France and Spain. Tory propaganda, however, was quick to play the anti-Catholic card and proclaimed that the Revolution meant that Boston's "Old South Meeting House is fitted up for a Cathedral, and that several other meeting-houses are soon to be repaired for convents."

The Catholic population after the Revolution numbered about 25,000 out of a population of nearly three million. While many of the legal disabilities ended after the ratification of the Constitution, the nearly invisible and primarily poor Catholic population did little to dissuade the new America of its inherited anti-Catholic prejudices. By the time there was a new America, anti-Catholicism was 160 years old in the American consciousness, and all the classic elements of this English heritage were in place.

What did this mean, this collective DNA of Catholic urban legends and Reformation propaganda? It meant that almost every American at the beginning of the 19th Century viewed Catholics as non-Christians who invested their faith in meaningless superstitions and thoughtless rituals that were a product of a pre-enlightened era, the "crosses and idle ceremonies of popery." As a prominent Boston minister referred to John Carroll, the first bishop of the United States: "It seems strange that a man of sense should be so zealous in the cause of nonsense."

It was universally believed that the Catholic Church, dominated by the pope and his hierarchical and priestly minions, was

inherently the sworn enemy of freedom and incapable of existing in a republic. Thus the need for "test acts" for public office, requiring that Catholics swear an oath that they would not have an allegiance to any "foreign power" (the pope). A common thread throughout 19th century populist thought in America was the danger that, on the orders of the pope, Catholics in America would rise up to violently overthrow the government and install "popish" rule.

Catholicism was identified as the religion of people deemed inferior by the White Anglo Saxon Protestant establishment, an alien presence within the United States with no understanding of or dedication to republican principles. Catholicism was seen as a faith contrary to true Americanism, essentially alien to the predominant Protestant culture. Benedict Arnold described a mass attended by leaders of Congress and wondered: "Do you know that the eye which guides this pen lately saw your mean and profligate Congress ... participating in the rites of a Church against whose anti-Christ corruption your pious ancestors would bear witness with their blood?"

The Catholic priesthood was invariably linked to sexual deviancy, portraying priests as lascivious predators of the young and innocent. In America, anti-Catholic literature was so strewn with sexual deviancy that it was often referred to as "Puritan Pornography."

With this common understanding of Catholicism, with a popular culture steeped in centuries of Catholic urban legends, America was ripe for the nativist explosion that would take place in

the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s.

As early as the 1820s, a number of factors were merging to bring Catholic urban legends to the forefront of American thinking. The Catholic Church was growing larger and becoming more of a public, visible presence – threateningly so. At the same time, a strong Protestant revival was underway and anti-Catholic newspapers and books began to be widely distributed. Most important, a trickle of Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany was to become a tidal wave. In the past, the few immigrants to America had come from the good Irish Protestants from the North of Ireland. But Catholics from the South began to arrive in growing numbers on the Atlantic coast, and in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s they would arrive in overwhelming numbers.

Oddly enough, the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1828 in England, which restored a host of basic rights to Catholics barred virtually since the Gunpowder Plot, also added fuel to the fire of anti-Catholicism in America. Tracts and propaganda fighting the 1828 legislation sent England into one of its regular anti-Catholic binges, and America got the overflow of the propaganda. Books detailing convent horror stories became enormously popular in the United States in the 1830s, and most of these were imported from England. Works such as *Female Convents* and *Secrets of the Nunneries Exposed* established the common elements of anti-Catholic literature: lecherous priests, secret tunnels between seminaries and convents, and the babies who resulted from these unholy unions slaughtered and buried in the basements.

The first distinctly American work to gain widespread popular attention was Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent*, published in 1835. Reed claimed to have been a nun who escaped from an Ursuline convent in Charlestown. (The Mother Superior explained that Reed had not been a nun, but an employee who had been dismissed.) Yet her "inside story" would sell nearly 200,000 copies within a month of publication, and remained in print for well over a century.

Reed's public telling of her story prior to its publication was part of the vicious anti-Catholic propaganda current in Boston that led directly to the burning of the Ursuline convent by a mob on August 11, 1834 – one of the first overt acts of violence aimed at a Catholic institution. The mob believed that a woman was being held in the convent against her will, and when the Mother Superior confronted the crowd with the threat that the bishop had armed Irishmen at his disposal to protect the convent, they responded by burning the convent to the ground.

Reed's book, however, would be overwhelmed by the success of the most famous work of anti-Catholic literature ever distributed in America. *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, or as it was more popularly known then and now, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, was first published in 1836. It would sell hundreds of thousands of copies in its early years and has continued to be published ever since.

Born in Canada, Monk claimed in her *Awful Disclosures* that she was raised a good Protestant girl and entered the convent school at the Hotel Dieu in Montreal for her education, then de-

cided to convert to Catholicism and become a nun. According to Maria's version, after making her vows she was forcefully introduced to her main responsibilities as a nun: serving the perverse sexual needs of Catholic priests. She alleged that babies that resulted from these unholy unions were killed. She said that she had discovered a gruesome cemetery in the convent's basement where the tiny bodies were buried, along with the young nuns who refused to take part in the orgies.

Monk claimed that a "Father Phelan" had caused her pregnancy and, fearing the murder of her child, she fled the convent. That was where the first edition of the *Awful Disclosures* ended. In the second edition, the tale continued with attempted suicide, pursuit and, finally, her arrival in the United States. Pregnant and near starvation, she claimed to have been found by hunters at the outskirts of New York. She told her terrible story to a Protestant clergyman who encouraged her to write it down. Sounds like a made-for-TV movie or an ABC News Special.

The reality of the story was a bit different. Monk had taken off from the Catholic asylum to which her grandmother had committed her. She had help from her former lover, who was the likely father of her child. In New York, she hooked up with a few Protestant clergymen who saw the opportunity to make a strong anti-Catholic statement, as well as a few bucks. Those ministers approached the publishing house of Harper Brothers with Monk's story. The Harper brothers set up a dummy corporation to actually publish the book, unwilling to have its reputation sullied with a salacious tale not for polite ears.

The book was released in January 1836.

The *Awful Disclosures* was an immediate sensation. It received rave reviews in the contemporary Protestant press and was cited as the first accurate depiction of convent life. The small Catholic community protested that it was a hoax. As the controversy grew, two Protestant clergymen went to Canada to inspect the Hotel Dieu convent. When they reported that the convent was nothing like Monk's description, they were accused of being Jesuits in disguise.

Monk disappeared in August 1837 only to resurface in Philadelphia, claiming to have been kidnapped by priests. It was discovered that she had actually taken off under an assumed name with another man. While this indiscretion seemed to discredit her story, there were many Americans still willing to accept her "awful disclosures" as truth. In 1837 she published another book claiming that pregnant nuns from the United States and Canada lived on an island in the St. Lawrence River.

Maria died in jail in 1849 after being arrested for pick-pocketing at a bawdy house. There has never been a period when the *Awful Disclosures* has not been in print in the United States.

Monk's tale combined many of the traditional aspects of Catholic urban legends, particularly the perversity of Catholic priests, with fears of the "alien" nature of the Catholic religion, its corrupting influence on the purity of the American experiment, the Church's tyranny over its members, the Catholic immigrants flooding our shores, and the Church's singular desire for

power.

At the same time that Maria Monk was making her public entrance, Lyman Beecher, the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, would publish *The Plea for the West*, in which he claimed that there was a Catholic conspiracy engendered by European monarchies to take over the Mississippi valley through mass European immigration. Samuel F. Morse, inventor of the first successful telegraph in the United States, shared this belief, claiming that Catholic royalty was flooding America with immigrants who would soon become an internal army under the pope's direction. It is said that Morse was not particularly an avid Protestant, but when he was in Rome a papal guard knocked off his hat when he refused to remove it as a religious procession passed by. Thus a life-long animosity was born.

Immigration, the growth of the Catholic community, over 200 hundred years of unvarnished anti-Catholic propaganda, the widespread distribution of anti-Catholic newspapers, books and pamphlets, Protestant revivalism, even the lay trusteeism dispute in the Church in America which seemed to pit "American" parishioners trying to protect their churches from the foreign influence of a bishop – all this combined into an anti-Catholic nativist movement that was already powerful socially, and would become powerful politically. The fear of an immigrant Catholic takeover of America that must be resisted at all costs to preserve American freedoms and the Protestant faith was ubiquitous.

This was the America that welcomed Bishop Michael O'Connor, an Irish immigrant himself by way of a successful career in Rome, as the first bishop

of Pittsburgh in 1843. Only a few months later, anti-Catholic riots broke out in Philadelphia, casting a huge shadow over O'Connor's episcopacy.

Catholics saw it as the "school question," Protestants saw it as a nefarious plot by Catholics to ban the Bible and destroy public schools. Public schools were in their infancy in the 1830s, and many functioned through various forms of funding arranged through states or municipalities. But whatever form of funding supported them, these public schools were generically Protestant. Daily bible readings from the King James bible, anti-Catholic textbooks, and a general indoctrination in basic Protestant tenets were the norm.

Not surprisingly, Catholic leaders took exception to the curriculum imposed on Catholic immigrants. Meeting formally together for the first time, the bishops of the United States had in 1829 collectively proposed that a separate Catholic school system be established, while warning of the dangers of exposing children to "corrupt translations of the Bible." Not the type of language to mollify Protestant critics.

Immigrants were starting to gauge their strength at the ballot box, another source of grave nativist dismay that would lead to a fundamental goal of the nativist political movement: a 25-year "waiting period" for citizenship and access to voting. Further, movements were underway to support Catholic education through a share in the funding that went to the common schools, the forebears of the public school system.



*Most Reverend Michael O'Connor
First Bishop of Pittsburgh*

The battle was first joined in New York in 1841 when Governor William H. Seward proposed that the privately run city school system devote a portion of the funding it received from the state to Catholic schools. This caused a major political furor with little accomplished except a marked rise in tension.

In Philadelphia, Bishop Francis Kenrick, mentor to Bishop O'Connor in Pittsburgh, tried the same idea with a twist: if Catholic schools cannot be funded, at least let the Catholic immigrant children have Bible readings from the Douay translation in the common schools. The Philadelphia school board rejected that idea, but said that Catholic children could leave the room when the King James translation was being read. When a teacher in the Irish neighborhood of Kensington complained of the disruption caused by the

children leaving class, the local administrator ordered an end to Bible reading entirely.

Enraged Protestants organized around the American Republican Party, an early nativist organization that became popular in Pittsburgh, to field candidates in Philadelphia who would restore the Bible to the schools and fight back the rising tide of immigration. When they tried to hold a rally in Kensington in May of 1844, a three-day riot ensued with Catholic churches burned and immigrant houses destroyed. Further rioting and bloodshed took place in July.

The issues of school funding and school Bible reading would become another battlefield experienced in virtually every Northern state up to the Civil War. And the arguments were rooted in Catholic urban

legends and anti-Catholic polemics. When Pennsylvania debated whether Catholic schools should receive any public funds, the *Philadelphia Sun* eloquently argued: "Are American Protestants to be taxed for the purpose of nourishing Romish vipers?"

The first issue of the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, dated March 16, 1844, a little less than two months before the Philadelphia riots, described the atmosphere then commonplace in Allegheny County and elsewhere: "Pittsburgh appears to be a field on which the enemies of our faith take special delight to display their powers . . . We have been represented as enemies of God, and traitors to our country. The foulest crimes . . . are stated to be our most cherished dogmas. . . . We are accused of making religion a veil for the most foul corruption and an engine of the most deadly treach-

ery." Catholic urban legends had come to Pittsburgh.

Bishop O'Connor asked for peace from the Cathedral pulpit after news of the Philadelphia riots reached the city, but promised to lead them if any churches or their homes were attacked. Bishop John Hughes in New York, known as "Dagger John," was more forceful. He informed local authorities that if one Catholic Church was attacked, "the city would become a second Moscow," referring to a Moscow burned to the ground before Napoleon. The threats of violence tapered off in New York.

In Pittsburgh in July, a nativist march was planned, but cancelled by authorities after the riots that had taken place in Philadelphia. The marchers assembled outside the city, then congregated later at the Cathedral, but no violence erupted.

Pennsylvania would become a hotbed of the Know Nothing Party, the virulently anti-Catholic nativist party that would have a million adherents nationwide by 1854. By 1855, they held the governorship and a majority in the legislature.

Pittsburgh itself already had a sizeable Catholic population through the immigrant labor community that the city desperately needed for its growing industry and commerce. Estimates run as high as 20 percent of the population of Pittsburgh and neighboring Allegheny in the 1840s was Catholic, and it continued to climb. In 1845 immigrants numbered approximately 125,000. By 1850, the number had climbed to nearly 400,000, and Catholic immigrants outnumbered any other classification. By 1855, in Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee, immigrants outnumbered the na-

tive born. In a very short period the same was true in New York, Buffalo, Cleveland and Cincinnati.

This high rate of Catholic immigration fueled the nativist movement and led directly to the formation of the Know-Nothing Party. The Nativists made it clear in their literature that they distrusted immigrants because they were Catholic, rather than distrusting Catholics because they were immigrants. All their literature posited the threat of a papal takeover of America and the incompatibility of Catholicism with republican virtues as their reasons for opposing immigrants. They welcomed Jews and generally left non-Catholic immigrants, such as Protestant Germans, alone. The hatred was religious-based and aimed squarely at Catholics.

All these factors played a role during Bishop O'Connor's years as bishop. The *Pittsburgh Catholic* engaged in endless debates with both political Know Nothingism and the social and religious bigotry that permeated the area with an endless parade of anti-Catholic rallies, newspapers, tracts, books and organized conversion efforts aimed solely at Catholics. With a powerful Presbyterian community that had its own newspaper, the *Presbyterian Advocate*, Catholic urban legends were a part of daily life. When a Catholic church was opened to serve the Catholic black community, Protestant clergy spread the rumor that the pastor was pro-slavery and the church was a front for rounding up former slaves to be returned to the South. The church was forced to shut down within a year. In 1846, when it was announced that a Catholic hospital would be opened to serve the poor, the response was that it

was a Catholic plot to capture Protestant souls for Rome on their deathbeds. The *Presbyterian Advocate* argued in 1847, as the hospital was about to open, that the Sisters of Mercy who would run it were engaged in prostitution. Catholic urban legends, indeed.

In 1844, City Council ordered a grading of the hill leading up to Saint Paul Cathedral. Many Catholics believed that the grading was done with the intent of making the cathedral dangerous and nearly impossible to enter. When a second grading was announced in 1847, the *Pittsburgh Catholic* believed that it was motivated purely by "hostility to our church."

Joe Barker first began to gain public notice in Pittsburgh in 1845. A minor political office holder, he gained fame as a street-preacher targeting Catholicism, and struck a popular chord. Politically organized nativism was on the rise in Pittsburgh while religious and social anti-Catholicism was fueled through the rallies held by the local branch of the Protestant Reformation Society, innumerable tracts distributed by Protestant mission societies, and the rising temperance movements which targeted the Catholic immigrant as the cause of the ever-growing problem of alcohol in American urban society.

According to Father Henry Szarnicki's biography, Bishop O'Connor was a favorite target of Barker's rhetoric. He called him "Micky" or "Irish Micky." Barker and his supporters would gather in the market place and often the police were called in to handle the inevitable troubles that would arise from his oratory. In September of 1849, the mayor had enough and had Barker arrested, charging him and his fellow-

travelers for obstructing traffic and using lewd and indecent language. (The *Presbyterian Advocate* responded that his intemperate language came directly from Catholic books that he cited.) Barker was fined and slapped in jail for 12 months.

But the political chaos of the times that would generate the Know Nothing Party, contribute to the death of the Whig Party, and lead inexorably to civil war had its own say in Barker's imprisonment. His nativist supporters rallied around him and convinced the majority of Pittsburgh citizens that Barker's freedom had been taken away from him by a conniving and corrupt Catholic Church and, most assuredly, a new Inquisition in Pittsburgh was just around the corner. Convinced that Barker's arrest proved that the Church was dominating politicians, the citizenry of Pittsburgh in 1850 elected Joe Barker mayor while he was still in jail.

Father Szarnicki wrote: "On the evening of the election, the victorious nativists formed a torch parade, forced Barker's release from jail, raised him up on the shoulders of two men, and marched him to the mayor's office. En route, the shouts and cries turned to howls and jeers as pauses were made before the Church of St. Philomena and the residence of Bishop O'Connor. After the revelers had their play, Barker was returned to jail pending a pardon from the governor."

Barker's term as mayor was a disaster, as could be expected. In one of his first acts as mayor, he ordered the arrest of Bishop O'Connor over faulty plumbing at

Mercy Hospital. Barker served as judge of the case and found the bishop guilty. Refusing the bishop's appeal, he gave him the choice between jail time and a \$20 fine.

More seriously, Barker's term as mayor gave free rein to nativists who no longer had to fear a police force hired by the mayor. As Father Szarnicki wrote, "boldly, they expressed their anti-Catholicism through cross burnings, petty thievery, window breaking, and threats of arson to Catholic edifices. On several occasions priests were maliciously accosted on the city thoroughfares. One Sunday morning a 'preacher' entered the cathedral and from the pulpit began to deliver an anti-popery harangue. Provocations of this kind were the order of the day, and to many it seemed that Pittsburgh was headed towards a riotous situation such as that in Philadelphia six years later."

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Bishop O'Connor believed that to be true, and expressed the fear directly in a letter to the Paris mission society that had provided financial support to the new diocese. Guards were often kept overnight in churches to deter attacks and priests began to avoid wearing their clerical garb in public. Anti-Catholic rallies were often held with the mayor delivering his usual fare. A plot was revealed to the bishop claiming that arson was planned for Catholic churches and Mercy Hospital. "Our situation in these matters is truly frightful," Bishop O'Connor

wrote. "Under an appearance of liberty they labor to produce a state of things in which I am sure they would propose nothing less than to throw us out of the city as soon as they obtain a pretext."

In 1850, the congregation decided to replace Saint Paul Cathedral, which by then stood 15 feet above the ground of the graded streets and could only be reached by wooden stairs. But before anything could be accomplished, on May 6, 1851 the Cathedral was burnt to the ground. The official investigation said the fire was caused by a spark from the chimney of the bishop's residence. Bishop O'Connor believed that nativist arsonists had torched the church, but didn't press the issue out of fear of the riots that could result.

Barker was out of office quickly, though in 1854 he would again be in the news when he accused Bishop O'Connor of taking sexual advantage of a young woman. The nativist movement that Barker represented was growing stronger in Pittsburgh and throughout Pennsylvania. In 1853, when

Bishop O'Connor was serving as Bishop of the newly-created diocese of Erie, he accompanied Archbishop Gaetano Bedini, Papal Visitor to the United States, on a visit to Pittsburgh. The purpose of Archbishop Bedini's visit to the United States was to explore the possibility of a nunciature in Washington and to review the state of affairs of the Church in the United States.

His visit was a disaster. Stirred by attacks on him by Alessandro Gavazzi, a former priest who claimed that as Governor of Bologna he had overseen the exe-

cution of Italian patriots (the charges were false), Archbishop Bedini was hounded by nativists throughout the Midwest. In Pittsburgh a group of nativists attacked his carriage, blew cigar smoke in his face, and engaged in a shoving match that roughed up Bishop O'Connor. After riots greeted the Archbishop in Cincinnati, he was smuggled out of the country incognito.

Any attempt to secure funds for Catholic schools was attacked as undermining the Protestant public schools. When Bishop O'Connor complained of Catholic taxpayers being forced to subsidize schools that were essentially sectarian, the plan was viewed as a thinly-disguised effort for Catholics to gain control of public education and to increase popery at the expense of the Protestant faith. O'Connor was branded a tool of a foreign agent – the pope.

The Know Nothing Party peaked in 1855 in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, then essentially collapsed from its own ineffectiveness. It was not that it did not have a visceral appeal, but it simply proved incapable of governing. It could pass convent inspection laws in Massachusetts and garner support for Bible-reading in the public schools, but it failed in the rudimentary responsibilities of government and was generally tossed out of office after one term. In Pennsylvania, it managed to pass the Price Act, which forbade bishops from holding property, but it died as a political organization in the national election that brought Abraham Lincoln to the presidency.

Though he was returned quickly to the See of Pittsburgh, Bishop O'Connor was worn down by the nativist attacks. He spent less and less time in his diocese,

and in 1855, as his health began to fail, he hoped to retire to the Jesuit order. He was eventually able to do so in 1860. Barker was run over by a train in 1862.

Conclusion

The world of Catholic urban legends did not disappear with the decline of the Know Nothing Party, the departure of Bishop O'Connor or Barker's death for that matter. Much of the post-Civil War political leadership in the country was made up of Know Nothings, converted to leadership of the new Republican Party. Most of Ulysses S. Grant's administration was made up of Know Nothings or Know Nothing sympathizers, including Grant himself. Various political movements, such as the American Protective Association in the late 19th Century and the revitalized Ku Klux Klan in the 20th Century, espoused a full anti-Catholic agenda and warned of Catholic aims to take over the public school system and for the pope to take over America. Despite its ever-growing Catholic population, Pittsburgh would not be immune to the survival and revival of Catholic urban legends.

Stripped of their theological trimmings, Catholic urban legends, particularly fear of alleged Catholic power, would be central to the debates over legalized abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research and immigration reform. The Catholic urban legends that prop up anti-Catholicism are just as vibrant today as the propaganda from the 19th Century.

Example: In a column in the February 10, 2006 *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, Donald Collins regurgitated almost line-for-line nativist fears of foreign bishops usurping the U. S. Constitution. Collins' alleged issue was the po-

sition taken by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on immigration reform. But rather than deal with that, he wrote of a dark litany about "Rome and these bishops" being hard at work for decades manipulating and shaping successfully U.S. public policy in regard to abortion, contraception, the separation of Church and State, and virtually every other issue.

Their latest victory, he wrote, was manipulating the appointment of a block of five Catholic judges on the Supreme Court. Collins claimed that the behind-the-scenes power exercised by the bishops came from their 1975 clandestine Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, which created "a national political machine controlled by the bishops" that "has taken over the Republican Party."

Collins restates classic nativism when he writes that Catholics embrace their beliefs "not because it represents the truth but because it represents temporal power of the most useful kind." Catholic action in defense of human life, according to Collins, has nothing to do with belief in the sacredness of human life, but is merely an exercise in "flock control," a calculated and cynical power grab over women and the "American body politic."

These are all arguments that could have come straight out of an 1854 Know Nothing pamphlet. And they were published in Pittsburgh in February 2006. Just a little reminder that Catholic urban legends are alive and well today.

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